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## Water Bucket

Ken Mick

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## **Water Bucket Ken Mick**

Most veteran pilots, when riding in a helicopter and not at the controls, are apprehensive. I was no different. The fact that the current pilots had several thousand hours of flight time, including hundreds of hours of combat time in Vietnam, made no difference.

Guard 615 flight consisted of two UH-1 helicopters from Company C/28<sup>th</sup> Aviation Battalion, a Virginia National Guard unit based in Sandston, VA, but assigned to the Pennsylvania-based Twenty-Eighth Infantry Division. The copters waited for the artillery to complete their fire missions on day three of the two-week annual training exercise at FT. A.P. Hill in Bowling Green, VA.

Aboard to evaluate today's special sling load mission, I waited for the action to commence.

"A.P. Hill Tower, Guard 615, flight of two UH-1s, from south parking for east departure to Range 17, over."

"615 flight, cleared to runway 09. Hold for range clearance."

"Guard 615, Hill Tower. You're clear direct to Range 17. Snort 3 will meet you at the helipad on standard Division frequency. Range is clear. Call arrival."

The Hueys flew a nap-of-earth route from Strip One, along Doctor Branch creek and over the barren wilderness of the impact area. The dry red terrain unrolled beneath the flight, pocked by craters and black patches of burnt fields and trees. An occasional circling buzzard or a rare bald eagle rode the thermals far above the copters.

"Snort 3, Guard 615 flight of two has your range flag in sight. We're 02 mikes out for landing."

"Roger 615, wind is east at 05 knots. Land at your discretion."

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The aircrews landed and shut down the Hueys. They strolled over to the lieutenant assigned as range officer. A three-quarter-ton support truck pulled into the range and parked by the resting aircraft. SFC Ronkartz, C Company First Sergeant, dismounted and reported. After the formalities, he and his helpers unloaded the canvas-covered cargo.

They placed the assemblage beside Guard 615 and unfolded the package, exposing a cleverly-folded water bucket. The 250-gallon container with its various valves and straps, when filled, became a sling load capable of extinguishing small fires when emptied from the helicopter.

The large red range flag flapped overhead. Twenty Pennsylvania guardsmen and the range crew sat on a sun-faded set of army bleachers waiting for something to happen.

Earlier artillery firing exercises had ignited several fires within the sprawling gunnery impact area. Our mission gave us an opportunity to train with the water bucket on active fires while demonstrating its efficacy to the Guard soldiers.

The range officer introduced me to the waiting mortarmen. "I am Major Ken Mick, commander of Company C. Periodically, as you fire your mortars, breaks will allow our helicopter to fill a water bucket and put out nearby fires." I paused and asked, "Any questions?"

I pointed to a guardsman with raised hand. "Sir, how do you fill the bucket?"

"Excellent question, Specialist. Behind you is a pond along the road. We'll demonstrate the procedure in a few minutes, fill the bucket, fly downrange, and dump the load on the fire you see along the tree line."

The lethargic guardsmen perked up as they readied themselves for a show. I turned them back over to the lieutenant and twirled my right arm overhead. On cue, the crew of Guard 615

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initiated the start procedure with its attendant excitement-producing whistles, whines, snaps, and a steady roar.

I strode back to the running helicopter and climbed in. When operating RPM became steady, the first sergeant positioned himself before the nose of the aircraft, raised his arms to shoulder height, and moved them up and down. The helo began to rise and stopped when the guide stopped flapping. The ground crewmen placed the empty bucket beneath the copter, attached the straps to the aircraft lift hook and moved clear.

Ronkartz raised his arms and the ship lifted, with the bucket now hanging below. When clear of ground obstacles, he signaled a hover again, then pointed with both arms toward the pond and made a shooing motion.

The aircraft proceeded to the pond. The gunners cheered and clapped at the noisy display. The helo hovered, holding the bucket above the water until cleared to lower it by crew chiefs (CE) hanging out either side. The senior CE indicated readiness. The pilot replied, "OK, Al."

The ship descended until the bucket entered the water and began to fill. When loaded, the CE signaled a hover. The pilot lifted the aircraft to one hundred feet above ground level (AGL), turned and proceeded downrange to the small brushfire.

"Sir, we're over the fire. Slide left. Stop. You're clear to dump."

The CE pulled a cord and released the flap holding the water inside the bucket, causing the aircraft to rise. The liquid cascaded onto the flames, producing a cloud of steam. The weight of water soaked the fire. The mortarmen cheered and stomped the bleacher boards in a resounding display of appreciation for the entertainment.

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After several more water flights, the UH-1s shut down again and shared a C-ration lunch with the mortar crews. When finished, I assumed the aircraft commander position in Guard 615 to continue the water mission.

“Hill Tower, Guard 615 flight, request direct Range 17 to Wilcox Campsite.”

“Roger, 615, ranges cold. You are cleared direct as requested. Call arrival.”

The flight lifted off from the mortar range and proceeded, flying contour along the creek to Wilcox Campsite where C Company Flight Operations and its grass airstrip lay. The dusty area needed cooling and the bucket flight planned to provide it.

“Stone Bird Ops, this is Guard 615, Stone Bird 6, flight of two with water bucket. Request a practice dump along the strip.” My call to the operations officer would be approved as soon as the strip cleared.

“6, this is 3 actual. You are cleared for a water pass as soon as practical. Call final.”

“3, this is 6. Wilco.”

I continued on the controls as I did not want this to be screwed up by anyone. If so, the CO would take the heat anyway, so why not enjoy the act? The aircraft circled and lined up for an approach down the runway. On short final, I called, “3 this is 6. I’m making a low pass over the Ops area before the airstrip drop.”

“6 this is 3. You are cleared as requested. No other traffic.”

The aircraft climbed to 200-feet AGL and headed directly toward where the General-Purpose Small Operations Tent sat at the edge of the highest trees. The call served to bring the S3 and two specialists to the open front tent flap for a better view of the show.

“Dump the water, Al,” I called.

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Al, the CE, immediately jerked the wooden control handle to the flapper valve for the water bucket. A tangle in the line voided the intended action. “Al, what’s happening?”

“Sir, the line is jammed. Flapper won’t dump the water.”

“Punch it, Al!” The poorly phrased command flowed clearly to Al’s earphones. He reacted as he had been trained, grasped the emergency release lever, and energized the jettison mechanism. The lift hook snapped open and allowed the 1500 pounds of filled water bucket to drop away from the Huey.

“What have you done?” I called as the abrupt release of the plummeting bucket caused the helo to soar. The errant container beelined toward the unsuspecting radiomen below. It crashed into the treetops, tipped, and continued downward.

The operations crew stood transfixed below the projectile and met an incoming tsunami of lake water. Thankfully, the foliage dispersed the liquid cargo and enhanced the intended effect of the planned prank.

I sighed as I realized that my action would neither maim nor kill any of my troops. I circled the aircraft around the drenched tent and landed the UH-1 in the open field outside Ops. “You have the controls. Shut it down,” I said to the copilot, unbuckled, jumped down from the cockpit, ducked under the coasting rotor blades, and ran toward the operations crewmen.

As I approached, I realized that the three-man operations team had grown larger. The furious S3, restrained by the operations sergeant, bellowed in anguish. I stared in horror at the crushed remains of the S3’s beloved Weber 6000 Deluxe gas grill, complete with the remains of prime beef steaks now sizzling in a puddle.

While the water bucket’s demise left the soldiers uninjured, the sudden influx of water flushed a poorly secured wooden stake holding the Two-Niner-Two radio antenna erect. The guy

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wire pulled the tall structure off balance and onto a remarkably accurate arc causing it to smash the expensive cooker.

My career seemed to evaporate as I recognized additional individuals. I jarred to attention and saluted the two unintended victims. The first wore a red keystone patch on his left shoulder, a large yellow First Cavalry patch on his right and two stars on his collar tabs: the division commander, red-faced and wet. The second had a cross on his fatigue cap and eagles on collar tabs: the state chaplain, red-faced and hopping mad.

The two-star general glared, returned my salute, and said, “You were cav, weren’t you?”

“Sir, yes sir.”

The general turned, incensed priest in tow, and mumbled, “If you ain’t cav, you ain’t shit.” He chuckled, mounted his jeep, and drove away.